

In Season and Out of Season

*“Preach the word;
be instant in
season, out of
season.”*

—II Timothy 4:2

THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE

the words of our opening text to Timothy as a reminder to him, and to all footstep followers of the Master, that it is God’s will for them that they lay down their lives in the service of the Truth, by witnessing to the world, and building one another up in our most holy faith. This phase of the divine requirements for the Christian should not be considered incidental. It is something which is directed in the Word of God, and whatever comes to us as an instruction from God should not be deemed as of secondary importance.

This commission from the Scriptures is binding upon us at all times—“in season, out of season.” When we see indications that it is a seasonable time for those to whom we are given the opportunity to testify the Gospel of the kingdom, we should let our light shine. Moreover, we should be willing and ready to preach the Word whether or not the time, place and circumstances may be convenient to us.

We would make a great mistake if we assumed that God's commands and exhortations to faithfulness in bearing witness to the Truth constitute the whole of the divine will for us. God does, indeed, want us to lay down our lives in his service, but he expects us to make that sacrifice in harmony with the precepts and principles which he has given us in his Word. If we fail to heed these we will be like those of whom the Master speaks when he says that some would come to him claiming that they had done many wonderful works in his name, but that he would recognize neither them nor their work. Jesus makes it plain that because these did not serve in harmony with the divine will they were in reality workers of iniquity.—Matt. 7:22,23

PROPERLY EQUIPPED

In order to be an acceptable ambassador of the Lord there are certain qualifications which the Christian must meet. He must, for example, repent of his sins and accept Jesus as his Redeemer and Savior. Then he must present himself in full consecration to God to do his will. This means that he has renounced his own will, and in thus doing has become a member of the body of Christ, accepting Jesus as his Head.—Acts 2:38; Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:23

Taking these steps, and being reconciled to God through Christ, the follower of the Master must then make every effort to bring his daily thoughts, words and deeds into harmony with the divine Word. This standard of righteousness is so high that it includes even the love of our enemies and a desire and effort to do them good.—II Cor. 10:4,5; Matt. 5:44

In II Corinthians chapter 6, the Apostle Paul outlines many of the important points of Christian practice essential to our being acceptable ambassadors of the Lord. He says that in “all things” we should be “approving ourselves as the ministers of God.” (vs. 4) The phrase “approving ourselves,” in the original Greek, means to constitute or establish ourselves as his servants.

Then Paul proceeds to outline some of these “all things.” Among them are patience, purity, knowledge, longsuffering, kindness, being filled with the Holy Spirit, having on the armor of righteousness, and humility which will enable us to serve faithfully even though unknown, and which will keep us balanced although well known.—vss. 4-9

Paul also speaks of the importance of “love unfeigned,” which is the sum of all the Christian graces. (vs. 6) He further warns us against being unequally yoked together with unbelievers. He stresses the importance of being kept free from the worship of false gods and fleshly idols. (vss. 14-18) Paul shows that all of these points are important in order that our “ministry be not blamed.” (vs. 3) These are the qualifications for our service, but by themselves they do not constitute our service.

PREACH THE WORD

Among the requirements for service mentioned by Paul in the foregoing passage is the possession of knowledge. This means a knowledge of the Truth, which gives us a knowledge of God. If our ministry of the Truth is to be pleasing it must be in harmony with God’s plan. Knowledge of the Scriptures in connection with our ministry is fundamentally important,

because our message must be a true representation of the Heavenly Father's eternal purposes. If such is not the case, while we might be laying down our lives in a ministry, it would not be one of the divine Word but would be proclaiming the theories and traditions of men.

In Philippians 2:16, the Apostle Paul speaks of "holding forth the word of life." This suggests that if we are truly preaching God's Word we are "holding forth" a hope of life to those who hear. To present a message of this kind properly implies the necessity of explaining the great fundamentals of the divine plan. These include such scriptural doctrines as creation, the fall of man into sin and death, the redemptive work that is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the hope of the heavenly calling of the present age, and the hope of restitution for the world in the next age. All of these features of God's plan are involved in the "word of life" set forth in the Gospel.

Dispensational aspects of the Gospel also have a part in an acceptable ministry. It is our privilege now not only to proclaim a hope of future life in "the times of restitution of all things," but also to assure our hearers that this hope is soon to be realized. (Acts 3:20,21) Today mankind is recognizing more and more that human wisdom is utterly failing to find a solution for the world's problems. Hence many want to know whether there is a God who is interested in their affairs, and who proposes to help the human race out of its dilemma.

It is at this time, therefore, that we have the privilege of obeying the commission of Isaiah 61:1,2, which states: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon

me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn.”

IN SEASON NOW

Proclaiming the various truths associated with Isaiah’s prophetic commission is very much “in season” at the present time. While many are asking why the world is in its current distress and trouble, the vast majority are disinclined to consider viewpoints which emanate from the Word of God. Thus, it is not an easy time to proclaim the Gospel, but this does not mean at all that we should not make the effort. The divine will in connection with bearing witness to the Truth should never be determined upon the basis of how easy or how difficult it may be. If we let our light shine only when it is convenient or easy to do so, the probability is that we will not let it shine at all. Paul says that we should hold forth the Word of life “in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation,” a world in which we are to “shine as lights.”—Phil. 2:15

Human reasoning today might be inclined to conclude that people have become so perverse and wicked that there is no use to letting our light shine. However, this is not the way Paul reasoned. It is the general evil conditions in the world today that make our witness work important. In this respect, conditions in the world are much the same now as they were in Noah’s day, yet he continued to be a “preacher of

righteousness.” (II Pet. 2:5) When sin no longer exists in the world, our witness efforts will be unnecessary. Then no one will need to say to his neighbor, “Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD.”—Jer. 31:34

WORLD’S CONVERSION FUTURE

It is true that we should not expect to convert the world at this time. That is to be accomplished through the future work of the kingdom. However, our knowledge that the results of the present witness work will be meager should not deter us from doing all we can to let our light shine. Experience has shown that “one here, and one there” have been blessed by the rays of light which have shone out as a result of these efforts. We believe that this will continue to be so until the end of the church’s experiences on this side of the veil.

The Lord may not always reveal to us the encouraging results of our efforts, and we may not know the extent to which the Truth we have proclaimed has reached into the hearts and lives of others. This, however, should not be of particular concern to us. Our sacrifices should not be made with the object of seeing great results, nor of receiving present rewards. They should be made, rather, upon the basis of faith, zeal for the Gospel message, and because we know it is the Lord’s will that we participate in his work.

Our fallen flesh shrinks from sacrifice, and may often seek excuses for not letting our light shine. Just as Satan quoted the Scriptures in an effort to tempt Jesus to leave the pathway of sacrifice, so the Bible may at times be quoted to us now for the same purpose. One text sometimes misused in this regard

is Jesus' admonition not to cast our "pearls before swine." (Matt. 7:6) The thought might be expressed that because the world is so wicked and "swine-like," we should not preach the Truth, as it will not be appreciated, and may even lead to persecution.

However, Jesus never refrained from preaching the Truth in order to avoid persecution. The darkness hates the light and will oppose the light-bearers. (John 3:19,20) To cast our pearls before swine is evidently quite a different matter from letting our light shine in a darkened world. We should not attempt to force the Truth upon those who do not care to hear it. Neither should we spend time and effort trying to interest individuals who are in violent opposition to the Truth. We are simply to "sow beside all waters." (Isa. 32:20) When we note a positive response on the part of one here and there, we are to make further sacrifices in order to help such individuals know the Gospel message more fully.

HOW WE MAY SERVE

It is a matter of concern to many of the consecrated as to just how they can serve the interests of the Truth. Ways and means of letting our light shine are much more numerous now than they were in the days of the Early Church. Back in those apostolic times most of the brethren were limited to whatever personal contacts they could make. This, in fact, is still a very important means of letting our light shine—perhaps more so than almost any other means at our disposal. It is limited, however, in the number of people it reaches.

Today, this personal method of proclaiming the Gospel can be greatly augmented by the use of many

other avenues available. There are many times in our comings and goings that a tract or booklet can be left for others to read. The printed page can be used effectively to supplement the spoken word. Many today are rejoicing in the Truth because some consecrated child of God left a piece of literature where it was found and read by them.

COOPERATIVE EFFORTS

There are also the more general and cooperative efforts to make known the glad tidings. Some of these are radio and television programs, including recorded announcements which advertise literature; advertising on the Internet; literature booths at fairs; and presentation of the message on many different types of electronic media. These are efforts in which all may have a share in one way or another. What blessings result to each one who faithfully does his part in these cooperative efforts! It is a human weakness to let others shoulder responsibilities which we could help to assume ourselves. However, this should not be so among the consecrated people of God.

One of the scriptural illustrations of light-bearing is Gideon's little company of three hundred Israelites who broke their vessels to let the light shine out. (Judg. 7:1-25) According to ancient custom, only the captains of an army carried lights at night. When the Midianites saw three hundred lights flickering on the hillside, they assumed that Israel's army was tremendously large, and they became terror-stricken at the thought of engaging them in conflict. This was part of the Lord's strategy by which the Midianites were defeated.

There is a good lesson here for us. It is that each one of the consecrated should feel an individual responsibility for the Lord's work. This does not mean, however, that we should go a different way and not cooperate with others. The Israelites were not free to do this. They were under the command of Gideon, and acted in accordance with his instructions. Today, we are under the direct command of the Lord. We have no liberty of action outside of his instructions, but we do have an individual responsibility of faithfulness to those commands. Those who did not wish to go with Gideon were at first given the liberty to turn back. That is the freedom we had as we counted the cost concerning the way of sacrifice. Now, however, as Paul wrote, "We are not of them who draw back."—Heb. 10:38,39

We are to work individually in the sense of realizing our own responsibilities, and of being zealously on the alert to use faithfully every opportunity we can find to sacrifice our all in the service of the Lord. However, we are all brethren in Christ, and members of his body. Hence, our activities should be governed by that which is in the best interest of the body as a whole. At times, this may mean the subordination of our personal preferences to the expressed wishes of the ecclesia, or of those with which we are engaged in a joint effort. Blessed are we if we can learn thus to cooperate with God's people, even though at times it may mean the humbling of ourselves.

IN EVERY WAY

Hence, though it may be that the time and manner of service offered may be "out of season" for us, if it is "in season" for the ecclesia, we should gladly and

humbly cooperate whenever and wherever we may have the opportunity. If it be the privilege of distributing literature, we will use it. If it be follow-up work, we will gladly do that also. If it be the opportunity to spread the Gospel through electronic media, we will be ready to use those talents if they be ours. If it be to serve as an elder or a deacon, we will accept that service in humility before God.

If it should be a financial service that we can provide, then we should do what we can, no matter what the amount may be. In all these, and in many other ways, we will enter enthusiastically into the privileges set before us. We will do so knowing that we are cooperating with the divine commission to preach the Word, and thus to be lights in this dark world.

THE ISOLATED ALSO

It may be that we are isolated, hence not members of an ecclesia. In this case, perhaps there is all the greater need to sense our individual responsibilities before God. Where a few can meet and work together, they help to keep each other encouraged. Several coals of fire, when together, will continue to burn, but if separated they will die out the more quickly. Thus, as individual "coals," if we are isolated from others of like precious faith, we will need much prayer and a strong faith to keep our zeal fervent. There is no better help along this line than to keep actively interested in bearing witness to the Truth.

Though we may spend a lifetime trying to interest our friends and neighbors in the Truth and yet fail, we should not be discouraged. As we keep trying, the glorious message of the kingdom is kept alive in our

own hearts. This, after all, is the truly important thing. The commission to proclaim the Gospel is given to all the consecrated, and whatever is accomplished by our preaching is under the direction of the Lord. He “giveth the increase.”—I Cor. 3:7

The Scriptures reveal that the work of preaching the kingdom message during the entire Gospel Age will result in the bride’s making herself ready to be united in marriage with the Lamb. (Rev. 19:7) Our sacrifices along this line are, therefore, primarily on behalf of the brethren, and not for the converting of the world at the present time. It was through the self-sacrificing efforts of others that we ourselves were reached and our hearts made glad. Now it is our privilege to lay down our lives for the brethren, some of whom are already with us, while there are others, perhaps just one here and one there, yet to be reached. Let us then be faithful “in season” and “out of season,” even unto death.—Rev. 2:10

